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Murrieta, Temecula both knocking on Hilton's door

LISA WEISS**Staff Writer**

MURRIETA ---- Hotels and conference centers bring needed tax revenue and recognition to cities, but proposals for two such centers in Murrieta and Temecula could make for a crowded market.

The hotel developer for the proposed Murrieta Entertainment Complex ---- a retail-entertainment complex proposed to replace the ill-fated RogersDale USA proposal ---- is applying for a Hilton Hotel franchise, but so is Temecula developer Bill Johnson. As the market stands now, a Hilton official said Monday, it looks like the Temecula franchise is more likely to be built.

Market conditions, not geography, determine how many hotels can go in one area, said Eric Jacobs, a director of franchise development for Hilton, and Temecula and Murrieta draw from the same pool of potential customers.

Most of the commercial base is in Temecula and it would support a Hilton Garden Inn, a mid-priced hotel designed for families and business travelers.

"As it stands now, Murrieta is still a bedroom community," Jacobs said. "I get calls all the time from people who want to develop hotels there and I tell them they are too far away from where people want to be."

At this stage, Jacobs' assessment is fair, Murrieta City Councilman Jack van Haaster said Monday. "But if you look at the general plans of both cities, there is just as much commercial and industrial land (in Murrieta). As Temecula gets built up, people are going to start looking north," he said. "On a timeline, Temecula is five to 10 years ahead of us, but it's not always going to be that way."

Both Johnson and the developer who is planning to build a hotel in the Murrieta Entertainment Complex, Westlake Village-based Brown Hotel Group, have applied for franchises for Hilton Garden Inns.

Although Temecula has the attractions in place, Jacobs said, if the Murrieta Entertainment Complex were built, it would become the catalyst that would attract both vacationers and business travelers. Plans for the \$155 million complex, to be built on land bounded by Murrieta Hot Springs Road and Interstates 15 and 215 known as the Golden Triangle, call for a 6,500-seat pavilion, shops, restaurants and conference space.

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The project, along with a study into its likelihood of success, will be presented to the Murrieta City Council Sept. 5.

Brown Hotel Group Chairman George Brown said Monday he had submitted an application for a Hilton franchise back when the project planned for the Golden Triangle was known as RogersDale, a western-themed retail-entertainment complex that failed when bonds to finance the project failed to attract investors in January.

Both Brown and Jacobs said they had confidence in project developer Zac Henson and had long working relationships with him but needed to see proof that the Murrieta Entertainment Complex would really be built.

"Before we move ahead, I want to see that there is financing in place," Brown said. "We need to know that the project is going to go forward."

While Murrieta looks to the future, Johnson is banking on existing attractions, such as the wine country and the businesses already operating in Temecula, to fill the rooms of another new hotel.

Johnson said he is also negotiating an agreement for a Hampton Inn, with rates at about \$85 per night, that would be built near the Embassy Suites off Rancho California and Ynez roads. Both Hampton Inn and Embassy Suites are part of the Hilton Hotels Corp. Rates for rooms at Garden Inns are usually around \$115 per night, Jacobs said.

Johnson said he is looking to develop a conference center on that land with the city of Temecula. An 18,000- to 22,000-square-foot conference center is in the city's capital improvement plan but there is no financing identified, said assistant city manager Jim O'Grady. "An economist we consulted thought there would be a demand for such a facility by 2002."

There is no proposal on the table, Johnson said. "But this would be the best use for this piece of land. It could become the social center of the area."

Contact Lisa Weiss at (909) 676-4315, Ext 2624 or lweiss@nctimes.com.

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webmaster@nctimes.com

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editor@nctimes.com
